

October 10, 1989

Some thoughts on identity, social organization, struggle and change

One of my arguments with Ram Dass: He is uneasy with any approach to confrontation. He feels it is divisive, polarizing, and that it "scapegoats" an opponent, loading certain people with all responsibility and blame for a bad situation, obscuring the reality that "we are all responsible." (While, of course, demonizing the others and making it impossible for them to hear us, to join with us in healing the situation.)

But he does not merely point to the ways in which "we all" share responsibility for a situation. He implies or asserts that "we are all" equally responsible for the situation. [See the attached excerpt from his course in New York, fall 1988] He rarely if ever recognizes any difference at all in power, role, or relative responsibility or blame.

This is part, it seems to me, of a Buddhist or "Eastern" blindness to organization, structure, hierarchy, roles, class and power within society. Like other "Easterners," he fails to see or acknowledge the reality, importance, functioning of such structures, as if society consisted of an unorganized mass of more or less equivalent individuals.

When others ("Westerners"/"radicals") do single out some individuals or groups or "elites" on the basis of their roles, authority, power or class, he sees this as "scapegoating," akin to racial prejudice, nothing more than a way of denying our own equivalent complicity and blameworthiness and responsibility (and, by implication, or even explicitly, our own equivalent power to change the situation).

Thus, in connection with the plight of the homeless, he objects to pointing with any special emphasis at Reagan or Bush, Koch or Trump. This definitely goes beyond the valid and useful observation that the problem does not start or end exclusively with them, or with the government, or even "the Establishment," but that very many of us--especially in the middle class--share values and behaviors that make us part of the problem, sharing complicity, and that we need not wait on others to change our own relation to the situation in various effective ways.

My own feeling is that he and others like him are themselves denying and neglecting an important part of reality: the existence of structure, power structure, and thus, differential responsibility, all of which bears on the nature of the obstacles to change, the systemic inertia, to be expected, and what is needed to deal with this.

Moreover, he may also be neglecting or underrating the significance of differences, among different individuals and in particular, among groups and power-statuses, in perspective, interest, motivations, aims, values. Differences in perceptions of what "the problem" is, the sense, if any, in which a situation is seen (in his words) as "not working." (It may be working very well, or quite acceptably, from the perspective of some: at least, compared to any alternative they can imagine: any that would involve less benefit, or power or authority or status for themselves).

To improve matters, it may be necessary to change the policies of some powerful people. It may be hard or impossible to do that--at least, truthfully--without at least implicitly criticising their past or present performance or judgment in certain social roles or office. That will be perceived by them as an attack, and indeed, it will weaken their prestige in and claim on their role or office, especially in the face of active rivalry for their position.

In fact, it may practically be impossible to change the social policy without changing the role/office-holders (even if not, changing the whole structure of roles and power). This is "politics," and it has the attributes that Ram Dass generally abhors.

In calling for change of certain social practices or institutions, one may be calling upon certain powerful people to give up things--offices, statuses, or even short of that, beliefs, ways of behaving, aims, values--that they regard and defend, consciously or not, as part of their vital "identity."

What they are called on to change or give up might be what they regarded as the basis of their masculinity (much more rarely, for powerful office-holders, their femininity: e.g., Pat Shroeder perceives a virtual demand that, if she run again for President, she refrain from crying under any circumstances). Or their patriotism, or nationalism. Or ethnic identity.

Leftists tend not only to deprecate the worth of these aspects of identity, but greatly to underrate their motivational power. Thus, even Gorbachev (an unusual "leftist") is being surprised and confounded by the strength of ethnic and "nationalist" identities within the USSR.

To appeal to an enlarged, inclusive sense of identity--ideally, species identity or even broader, earthly or cosmic--as Erikson and many of us favor, may be to underrate and disregard the very strong forces (poorly understood) that work to stop the process of expanding identity beyond the family and tribe at "national" limits far short of hemispheric or global reach, and



which work to give most identities an adversarial character to some degree.

Like most of my colleagues, I tend to deprecate these tendencies, to fear them, and to seek to understand them especially so as to counter them. But this morning I thought of one way in which I myself resist insistent appeals to larger, inclusive identity, in the way that Ram Dass and other New Age thinkers often make them: when they deny--in the name of "common humanity," and common complicity, weaknesses and aspirations--what seem to me important differences in individual and group responsibility and power, along with perspectives and interests.

To fail to recognize and identify specific people as having unequal amounts of power and authority--and therefore more responsibility for certain situations and events than others--is to fail to challenge the existing pattern of authority, roles and power, the existing organization of the social system in question, the power structure. And this is, in effect, to accept that existing social structure.

Not only is this to support precisely what may most need changing. It encourages people--by not challenging them and stimulating them to do otherwise--to continue to accept active roles within that organizational framework, to continue to respond to existing leadership within a hierarchical pattern of roles and power that has produced and sustains the "problem" in question, and may even have been shaped over time precisely to produce this functional effect.

Imagine exhorting various individuals who happen to be in an army at war to change their own relation to the "problem" of social inequality (between officers and enlisted) and of violence, without in any way recognising the existence, or bearing, of institutional structure or its pressures on their behavior.

As someone who is trying to change certain aspects of social behavior, and social institutions, I guess I resist being admonished by New Age thinkers that I am "polarizing, scapegoating, creating divisions, generating anger, hatred, contempt and other sources of obscurity and unenlightenment" when I encourage either criticism of others or confrontation or resistance.

I experience (to use a New Age formulation) appeals in this context exclusively to a common humanity as being of the same nature as appeals to common patriotic nationalism during wartime, when these are used to discourage strikes, economic demands or demands for gender or racial rights. These appeals to larger, inclusive identity, work both to obscure, distract attention from, and thus to sustain existing patterns of authority, power and benefits (which are, as always, extremely unequal).

An appeal to a larger, shared identity may have the effect of getting people to (continue to) obey existing authority within that larger group, in support of existing policies, when they should not do so, in their own long-run interest or in the interest of other victims of those policies. To get them to be so compliant may be the very purpose of that "patriotic" or "humanitarian" appeal to larger identity.

Or it may not be the purpose: as in the case of Ram Dass. Yet it may still have that effect. And that is one reason some--including me--may sometimes resist that appeal.

Surely, the common humanity remains a reality. And short of that, common nationality or regionalism or other group identities may be an important reality, and a positive basis for reaching an acceptable solution. What Ram Dass has to say is also important, a valuable contribution.

What may be most needed is ways of bringing about needed social change and resolving problems and conflicts that recognizes both commonality/community and difference, both shared responsibility and differential power and responsibility. And which do not--in the interest of averting all blaming and shaming, any feelings of being accused or attacked--eschew any recognition of existing social structure.

It is surely important not to perceive human adversaries as being of a different, lesser species, not to presume or exaggerate differences in moral character or proclivities.

But it was Reagan himself who kept telling us that he "wanted peace, and an end to the nuclear arms race, just as much as any demonstrator." We should not necessarily act as if we believed that. Nor that each of us had just as much responsibility as he did for the war against Nicaragua or the failure to achieve arms reductions.

Without demonizing a Reagan or Bush, or believing or suggesting that he is other than human or that he fails to share any aspirations (or faults) with ourselves, we need to find ways to say, forcefully: "What you are doing now, what you say and believe, is wrong, and must change; we will not cooperate with it, obey you, be part of it, fail to resist it; we call on others to join us in refusing your authority (though you may feel that as a painful and "violent" assault on your values and your very, present identity)."

In doing so we are rejecting the exclusive significance of certain larger identities. We are asserting and creating a new group identity, in terms of certain issues, values and perspectives. Inevitably this new group will come to have its own structure, its own internal patterns of roles and responsibilities, its own "leaders" and authorities, of one sort or another. At



least temporarily and provisionally, it excludes certain others, it defines itself against other groups and organizations and policies, it accepts the existence of conflict and prepares to engage in struggle.

Surely it is important to recognize, recall, hold on to large, inclusive group identities (though some imperial identities, as in the USSR and East Europe, may be disintegrating at this moment, for understandable reasons, and no doubt with very mixed effects). But it can be equally important to discover or create smaller, less inclusive group identities, often precisely for the purpose of bringing about change--in office-holders, policies, power structure, values and aims--in the larger group.

All this--assuming non-violence and truthfulness--is very Gandhian. How is this mobilization for struggle--necessary, as Gandhi saw it, on the human level--related to cosmic "oneness," which Gandhi felt equally strongly? That is a paradox, Gandhi said, which with his limited human understanding he did not expect to unravel.

But though Gandhian thought may be a development of, or from, Mahayana Buddhism (or Advaita Hinduism) as well as from strands of Christian Gospel, it is not a logical, determinate result of either. It is a true emergence, an invention. Neither Jesus of the Gospels, nor Buddha, urged organization for the purpose of confronting and changing, alleviating and healing, organized, structured wrongdoing or evil.

Neither of these traditions aims to change human organization or power structure or the social policies dependent on these. Thus, neither can claim Gandhian action as a simple sub-category or extension of its own tradition.

Thus, for all the emphasis on human suffering and on compassionate action to alleviate and end that suffering in the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism and the examples of the Bodhisattvas, there is not a Buddhist tradition, to my knowledge, of relating human suffering to social structuring or to state power or policy, nor to the need or possibility of organizing people and behaving in concrete, non-violent ways so as to change social institutions or state policies. Nor does that approach come naturally to New Age thinkers.

Nor can an advocate of Eastern or New Age thought, or Christian mysticism, in my opinion, claim properly to be Gandhian in essence (on the basis of compassion, non-violence or austerity alone) while rejecting all that smacks of confrontation, division, denunciation (of actions and policy, if not of individual humans), struggle, and even--Gandhi's personal invention--organized, non-violent civil disobedience.